

Excavations at Ayia Varvara-Asprokremnos, 2011

The Ministry of Communications and Works, Department of Antiquities, announces the completion of the 2011 excavations at the 9th millennium site of Ayia Varvara-*Asprokremnos*. The investigations were directed by Dr. Carole McCartney of the Archaeological Research Unit of the University of Cyprus as part of the EENC (Elaborating Early Neolithic Cyprus) Project, an international collaboration between the Universities of Cyprus, Cornell University and the University of Toronto.

Ayia Varvara-*Asprokremnos*, currently dated by radio-carbon to between c. 8,800-8,600 BC cal, was occupied at the start of the Neolithic period on Cyprus at a time when the transition from hunting to farming economies was beginning throughout the Middle East. Unlike the large early village settlements seen at this time on the adjacent mainland, Ayia Varvara-*Asprokremnos* provides evidence of intensive resource procurement and manufacturing activity at a relatively small but extensively occupied campsite. The campsite is dated to some 11,000 years before present, during the initial phase of the Cypriot Neolithic known as the Cypriot Pre-Pottery Neolithic A, predating the well know World Heritage site of Choirokoitia by some two and a half to three thousand years.

Excavations during 2011 continued to unearth evidence of significant manufacturing activity associated with the production of chipped lithic tools including beautifully made arrowheads. The site, which is situated amongst the most prolific chert bearing Lefkara cherts on the island, was located with a view to lithic tool production clearly evidenced by the mass of chipped stone waste amounting to well over half a metric ton in weight. The tools produced indicate a subsistence focus on hunting and tools including burins, notches and scrapers were used to manufacture other tools and objects. Preferred selection of the highest quality of chert for chipped stone production and the precision exhibited by the assemblage mark the early lithic industrialists of the site as highly experienced specialists in their craft.

A second resource that claimed the attention of the ancient Neolithic inhabitants of Ayia Varvara-*Asprokremnos* similarly explains the choice of site location, namely, the wide variety of mineral pigments readily found in the copper bearing gossans located in Mathiati. Features excavated in 2011 provided significant amounts of red, orange, yellow, grey, blue-grey and purple ochre and the bright turquoise terra verde associated with an array of ground stone tools including hand-held grinding stones and grinding surfaces, pounding tools (including one unique reused example originally shaped like a schematic human head) as well as anvil stones found across work hollow tool spreads and deposited in shallow pits. Such minerals were known to ancient people not only for their colouring properties, but also as agents for tanning and the hafting of stone tools, activities that may have been conducted at the site, though the mass of ochre recovered to-date from *Asprokremnos* may also have been collected for re-distribution elsewhere.

The 2011 season also saw continued excavation of the curvilinear semi-subterranean structure that dominates the northern end of the site. Recovery in 2011 of the complete outline of this structure shows a near perfect circular construction c. 5 meters in diameter. Detailed excavation of the structure's interior shows a sequence of silt deposits indicating a succession of trampled earth floors along with erosion features that indicate periodic re-occupation cycles of this focal part of the site. The presence of a mud plaster over vertical ash deposits along the structure's wall have begun to provide evidence of a likely lightly timbered super-structure that once roofed the large pit cut into the havarra natural.



Excavations at Ayia Varvara-Asprokremnos, 2011